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Millennial Judgement Trilogy
Book 1 Blood and Fury

Prologue

Rilla is one of the many planets wrought by a war between Celestial and Abysmal forces. Both Celestial and Abysmal beings are all of the same origin, Mankind. Mankind being that which has yet to pick a side. At the end of every millennial cycle the realms of the divine and demonic come to enter into a final battle for the souls of Man. Only to bring about a new cycle once one side has been pushed back to their realm. Before such Man gets time to choose their side. The eyes of all hold signs of alignment. Therefore few may hide their heart from another. Those whose hearts lay in deceit, domination, or any manner of Abysmal virtue their eyes begin with touches of darkness. As one becomes more engulfed so do their eyes begin to fill until the whole turns dark like unto their soul. To those of Celestial favor a golden iris will manifest, a sign to all of their selfless heart and benevolent intentions. Celestial alignment is harder to attain; one can seem to be selfless, honest, suffering long for the Celestial virtues before being granted the mark. Though rare during the Millennial Cycle some attain the favor of an alignment so great they become an embodiment of that realm. These now ageless beings are granted miraculous power. Celestial Ascended maintain the body of mankind whereas the Abyss changes the body to better express the corruption they are engulfed in. This cycle nears its end and both sides seek to prepare the souls of those that lay in the middle.. Or in the extermination of those that cannot be swayed..

Chapter 1 Who are you?

The fog in Ravenwood is thick this night, such is not uncommon among a city that resides near a large lake and is surrounded by dense forest. Its buildings laden with a combination of dark oak with cobbled stone foundations. The light stone foundations of the buildings contrast the much darker slate laden on the street. There roofs incline steeply and are adorned with various engraved weaves throughout the wood. The moisture in the air causes the stone to glisten and reflect even the smallest light. Much of its denizens are nestled in sleeping the night away. Yet for those that have unlawful intentions this is the ideal night to go about one's secret works. In one of the many brothels within the massive city just such an occasion is about to unfold.

Loud is the music and loud are the people, strong drink and passionate intentions fill the air, save for one who just arrived at the bar. Laying a crossbow on the bar he then ties back his long copper hair exposing grey eyes one of which has two prominent black lines connecting to his pupil. Casually he sips at a mug of water. Some of which dripped down a short beard onto his recently roughed up lamellar armor. A working girl approaches, thinking him another intoxicated patron. She puts one hand on his

tarnished bronze manica, “Got some coin for me tough guy?” She winks then slides one hand into his hair.

“Leave me be whore,” he quietly growled, not bothering to even look her way. She rolls her eyes and steps away from the frustrated man.

“Radimir!” one of the few sober and well dressed men hollered over to him. A smile over his face he smacks Radimir on the shoulder “So how have you fared against Roriks flea ridden crew?”

With a smirk Radimir turns, “Aye we did well, they weren't alone though they were meeting with Senator Erebus’s guards, his own son leading the exchange.”

The man begins to look worried, “I assumed you called it off then,” he weakly states.

A slight smile now crossed Radimir’s face, “nonsense, I shot a bolt at the guards when the groups got close and they panicked like children. Not knowing if they were being betrayed, the guards attacked the scum they were supposed to trade with.” Radimir chuckles, “most got away but the one carrying the vials took a bolt straight to the face...” Radimir seems to drift off into the memory.

“So?” the man asked, now annoyed, “what happened to the Senator's son and did you get the extract?”

“Worry not Malik, the story only gets better.” Radimir turns on the stool to face the man completely and continues in good spirits, “we charged in right as the guy with the herbs dropped. There weren't a lot of guards but they put up a good fight. We lost some men, no one important.” His smile grew as he continued, “their helms didn't help much when I showed them with the back of my axe.” Radimir says proudly tapping the axe at his hip, a bearded blade on the front with a studded hammer like back. “Anyway the guards and the son are dead, we grabbed the coin used for the deal, stripped the armor, and left the extract near the son's cor-”

Malik chimed in, “why did you leave the nightshade, it was what you were sent to retrieve!” He spat out, growing angry.

Radimirs smile left, his face flickered into frustration, through gritted teeth he responded quietly yet firmly, “calm yourself!” Radimir collects himself slightly and continues. “I have the coin and enough republic armor in my wagon to make three times as much as your poison costs,” his smirk grows, “I left the poison near the senator's son then pitched and burned one of the dead guards. They will be found and with the upcoming election the city will care little for the deaths. The Senate will be far more concerned with why the son of the defending senator was in the slums with an illegal herb far too commonly used to poison opposi-”

Malik interrupts again, “and even if they look into it, it would lead them to Roriks crew. Not bad.” He says approvingly “Clever, how you thought of this on the go is.. surprisingly clever.. for a pit man. Just make sure you don't think you're clever enough to undercut the boss.”

Radimir smirks, “Aye, I won’t.”

Malik nods waving for Radimir to follow as he walks away, “your next job will be tomorrow night, I know it's soon but this is important and involves the deal with Vanehold”

Radimir grabs his crossbow, slings it over his shoulder, and follows Malik into the back hall, “don't get why you trust folk who align themselves with the tribes.”

Malik turns back, “I trust them more than that celestial monarchy to the south. Self righteous slavers far as I'm concerned! At least the tribes don't try to convert me. So long as Ravenwood stays independent we'll be fine. More the tribes fight, the more none of them will risk losing trade with the biggest source of ore in the region.”

They pass a few doors as well as some of Maliks guards before going down a set of stairs to the cellar. Within lay a quite well kept and laid out large area of tables with bunk beds in the back. At least 16 kids of varying ages litter the room with three women one caring for the children the others simply off to the side talking amongst themselves.

Malik turns to the one caring for the children, “Jenevieve this is Radimir” She walks up Her hair is thick and dark falling nearly to her waist as her oversized blouse and skirt modestly cover her from neck to foot. She doesn't make eye contact, simply points her head in Radimirs direction and nods. Malik continues, “he will be your escort when we move the kids tomorrow.”

Radimir looks her up and down, eyebrow raised. To Malik he asks “Is she another whore or a real woman?”

Malik, annoyed at the question, replies “She is a servant girl. I bought her debt a while ago. I had tried to convince her such work is far more lucrative. Yet she was pregnant when I got her and wouldn't even try it.” Malik eyes her with disappointment “Ida just sold her debt to someone else.” He shrugs “Buuut she stayed busy with other things and now keeps the kids content.” Malik snickers, “they wouldn't stop balling when we first snached them up.” One side of Ratimirs nose flares slightly at the remark though he hides it quickly before Malik looks back at him.

Now speaking to Jen Radimir states sternly, “look me in the eyes woman.” She brushes her thick dark hair from her face exposing two fair blue eyes free from any signs of the abyss. Radimirs eyebrow raises still stern but now almost reverent, “seems true enough. So who am I to kill next?”

Malik slightly laughs, “you don't have to kill anyone. In fact I'd prefer if you didn't kill anyone.” Still amused he calls over the tallest boy much older than most of the kids. “Jack here is a street boy. He volunteered to help us get some of the other kids. If you want a hand in anything just ask him he is well rounded in talents.”

Jack seems somewhere between 12 and 15 years of age. His curly hair lays nearly into his eyes, those eyes carrying flecks of black. He crosses his arms befor smugly saying, “I'm just doing what I need to survive I just do it better than most others.”

Radimir responds mockingly, “aye a roach can survive real well yet it's still just a roach.” he then turns to Malik, “let's talk details somewhere private.”

“My office then.” Malik says turning now to the stairs leaving the cellar. They enter a room just next to the top of the cellar steps. It is small with a desk cluttered with papers. Malik looks through a few, “you'll be wanting this in case you're stopped by a patrol.” He hands over some papers to Radimir.

Radimir looking at the papers smirks saying, “Adoption papers, who is gonna believe I adopted this many kids?”

“I don’t know.” Malik shrugs “It was easy and cheap to get so I figured I'd get it. I'm sure you'll find a use for it, if not who cares.”

Radimirs tainted eye flickers, “what about that paper?” He points behind Malik at the desk. Malik turns around confused. Swiftly Radimir draws his axe and with a heavy blow to Maliks neck drops him to the floor gasping for air. Another heavy swing severs his neck completely digging into the floorboards beneath. Radimir spits on his corpse, pockets the adoption papers then turns to the door closing his eyes and clasping his hands together he prays “Celestial spirits, tell Omaja I have found the children. To come quickly to the brothel and expect resistance.”

The door to the office began to open, a guard's voice peering in, “boss?”

Radimir runs forward right as the door opens fully; he drives his foot into the man's chest, sending him flying into the hall's wall gasping for air. Continuing forward and spinning his axe around Radimir clubs the man's skull, a loud crack filling the air as he goes limp. Three other guards further down the hallway look over surprised.

One of Radimir’s eyes becomes completely engulfed in blackness, “come and die!” he roars out as a smile crosses his face. Two of the guards look at each other then move in slowly, weapons drawn. The one in the back readies a crossbow and reaches for a bolt. Looking at the crossbowman Radimir’s eyebrow raises and he turns and jumps down the stairs to the cellar.

Quickly he bursts through the door, the kids and Jennivieve jump, “get them all to the side!” he yells as he closes the door behind him. Jen Quickly beckons them up and corrals them to the side of the room behind Radimir. Radimir steps to the side of the door preparing a bolt and shouldering his own crossbow. The moments following feel like forever. The door creaks first then slams open with a kick. After another several more moments a head and a crossbow pop out quickly trying to survey the room. Right as their eyes met they both shot. Radimir’s bolt rattles into the guard's eye socket. His own bolt glancing off Radimir’s mannica and a scream rips out from behind him. Ignoring it Radimir drops his crossbow readying his axe as he closes the distance to the door, cleaving the panicked half blind crossbow man's neck and dropping him. Hoping to limit the advance of the other two guards, Radimir stands right at the doorway. The second guard charges in, ducking a swipe from Radimir’s axe and tackling him. Radimir falling back puts both feet onto the man's hips. As he crashes

down onto the stone floor he presses both legs and catapults the guard over him. The Third guard still on his feet rushes forward moving around Radimir's legs and swinging his blade down on Radimir's head. In a flash Radimir raises his armored limb blocking the blow. Nearly simultaneously he kicks out at the man's knee buckling it sideways causing the man to fall. Radimir just makes it to his feet when the guard now behind him grabs hold of his shoulder plate and makes a swing for his head. Radimir barely ducks it, tucking into his arm he charges his shoulder into the man crashing him into the stone wall, then bites his axe into the man's exposed thigh. Radimir jumps back away from both men collecting himself. One guard clutches his now open leg, the second now back up keeping ground but not pushing clearly weary of the fight. A fourth guard now enters the room wielding a spear.

"Damn," Radimir sighs to himself. Keeping a safe distance he thrusts the spear at Radimir who slaps it away with his gloved hand but cannot find a way to move in.

"Keep him back!" the second guard yells running over to the crossbow. Radimir tries to slip the spear and push forward however the spear firmly strikes him in the chest bending but not piercing the plate, "damniiiht!" he growls.

Commotion along with a few screams ignite from back up the stairs. Heavy footsteps are heard coming down the stairs; the guard near the door drops the crossbow, his hands up in submission as he walks back away from the door. "Ascended." he whispers to his mate with the spear fear overcoming him.

In walks a tall man, his well worn breastplate and drawn sword glisten in the candlelight. His eyes shimmer a metallic gold, his skin a deep brown, contrasting his white hair dreadlocked and tied back. Through a full beard braided down to his chest his voice resonates both deep and commanding, "yield and I will spare you that your soul may yet have a chance to be cleansed before your judgment!" He points his blade at the man with the spear and instantly the guard drops it visibly shaken. Radimir finally notices Jenevieve crying over Jack who is struggling to breath with a bolt in his side. The dark skinned man sheaths his blade and walks toward them, "Radimir watch these men." He commanded his full attention now on the boy.

"Aye,You should let him bleed." Radimir coldly stated, axe still ready and eyes on the guards. "He helped take the other kids. He is filth."

The chain under the dark skinned man's plate shuffles as he takes a knee next to the young man trying hard to breath. His voice is still deep but more compassionate now, almost sorrowful. He puts a hand on the boy's head looking into his fearful eyes, "your eyes are tainted young one yet we still have hope for you."

Jen's eyes filled with tears she pleads. "Help him!" The dark skinned man eyes her for a moment. He strips his gauntlets from his hands and lays them onto Jack's ribs. Then yanks the bolt out blood trailing onto the ground. Jack attempts to scream but barely has the breath to do so.

Laying both his hands firmly on the boy's wound he begins to whisper prayer. His eyes and hands illuminate, “make whole this one's flesh and preserve him that he may forgo judgement for a time. That he may have the chance to come to us worthy of our glory.” Jack inhales greatly, now breathing rapidly yet clearly. The dark skinned man's eyes return to a shimmer of gold. He releases his hands from the wound still bloody but completely closed without even a scar to show for it.

Jen amazed at the sight of the healing hugs the dark skinned man almost knocking him off balance. Smiling he stands and gently guides her hands off of him, “thank you my lady but come we have already tarried too long.”

Radimir motions toward the guards, “what about them?”

“Leave them,” the dark skinned man shugs, “if they try to report this they risk being labeled criminals for the abductions and traitors for their secret dealings with the tribes. Remember that and the miracle you have witnessed today well,” he states firmly, eyeing the guards as he walks to the cellar door. He then pushes the dead crossbowman out of the doorway with his foot and he looks to Radimir seriously, “must you have done this in front of the children?” Radimir smirks and shrugs. The dark skinned man then holds open the door motioning for Jen and the kids to go up first.

Back above it lies near silence a few patrons lay wounded on the floor the rest along with the working girls are corralled to one side of the establishment. Many warriors bearing iron chain or gambeson keep them there. They are warriors of the Celestial Monarchy though they bear no surcoat nor were any chosen who have golden eyes to better hide their affiliation. The Monarchy heard of the many abductions of children in Ravenwood’s lands a few months back. Suspecting the evils were connected with the abyss aligned tribes to the east the King offered aid. A formal straightforward request to send forces to discover and purge any offenders. Though this was denied by Ravenwoods senate, some in the Monarchy thought they should still intervene. Soon one of the more controversial clergy authorities orchestrated this covert arrangement. Sending in men as neutral merchants from the Monarchies' lands they acted in secret. One ascended was sent to both reside in authority and commune with the celestial spirits. While Radimir was chosen to infiltrate his tainted eyes and aggressive nature making it all the easier to walk among the corrupt.

They had been stalling their leave for nearly a week every night waiting for the call that finally came. The actions taking place tonight would clearly upset relations between Ravenwood and the Monarchy to the south. Not to mention infuriate the King who knew not about this. Risky as it was with the coming end to the Millenia much anxiety has risen among the celestial aligned people. Impeding any abysmal corruption and gathering as many to their lands to be taught the way is seen as of the utmost importance. Though they all agree on this the methods they go about it is something argued about much by those in authority lord, king, and clergy alike.

Radimir's tainted eye had now resided back to the two lines. He readies his wagon along with many of the Monarchies warriors dividing up the children along each of the wagons. His being the only one with a full covering and many compartments on the sides. He grabs some feed out of a compartment near the front. Then steps up to the mule shorter than most but a sturdy animal and requires less feed for the work. Her coat is thick black to gray, long hair near the hooves and a mane quite short. Feeding her from his hand as he pats her muscled neck. "Been a long night Kine. Just a bit more and we will rest well aye?" More than a few of the cityfolk have now noticed the event, though in the slums of Ravenwood it is common knowledge one does not report anything till long after the deeds are done. Lest the folk themselves are in danger of retaliation from those that work in the shadows. Beside that there is a senator's son's corpse on the other side of the slums catching far more attention.

The dark skinned man approaches him with Jenevieve, Jack, a small boy around 4 to 6 and a girl around 10. "These ones will travel with you. Also I will ride with you till we break off at the valley."

Radimir climbs up and readies the reins, "very well, climb in." The back of the wagon is rather scarce with three shields of a flat top kite design, a few spears and a small barrel of bolts. An open faced nasal helm was nestled on top of one of the spears, its mail neckguard rattling as everyone got on. Most of its construction looked to be of iron yet the bands on the top and sides were of bronze.

Once the group settles in, the wagon gets moving. The dark skinned man finally introduces himself, "I am Omaja, what shall I call all you?" He smiles and seems to relax as he asks the question.

"I am Jenevieve," Jen states then motions to the young girl to answer.

The young girl remains close, her arm looped through Jen's. Her skin a light brown, much of her curly hair braided back. Very quietly she answers, "Eliana."

Jack sits looking out the back of the wagon, his arms crossed he ignores the invitation. Radimir knotices the pause, smirks and calls back, "that's Roach."

Jack, frustrated, looks back at Radimir for a moment before looking to the ground, "my name is Jack."

Omaja gives no acknowledgement to Radimirs comment, "it is good to meet you Jack," he says, still smiling.

The smallest boy now happily tries to stand for his turn. Quickly losing his balance due to the wagon moving and stumbles. Jens arm snaps out and snatches him before he falls and puts him on her lap. She keeps her eyes on the child as she answers for him, "this is Gabe. He is a handful but a sweet boy."

Gabe looks up at Omaja excited, "am i going back to mommy?"

Omaja, surprised by the question asks, "I thought you all were children without families, without homes?"

“Many of them were,” Jen answered, “though some were snatched up and taken from their homes. Gabe talked alot about fields of food. I think he is from Ravenwood’s farmland beyond the northern pass.”

Omaja was quiet for a moment looking disturbed and also stuck in thought. Finally he speaks, “I will bring this up with the Bishop at Archbridge. We will figure it out, for now we shall stick to our original plan. To vary now could cause us to be blamed for the original abductions.”

Radimir chimes in with respect in his tone, “his parents would probably raise him in corruption anyway. Most of Ravenwoods people are far from celestial. Don't overthink it brother.”

Omaja stops for a moment continuing to ponder to himself before continuing on, “all this shadow work is unbecoming of a celestial, this is not the proper way and now we may suffer for it,” he begins to grow frustrated in the thought.

Radimir speaks up in a calm straightforward voice almost as though he is asking a question with his statement, “because of this work we have saved many children, shadow work has helped us do this.”

Omaja responds with absolute certainty, “yet deceit keeps souls in darkness. Remember my friend it is not the outcome of actions that bring us celestial favor but our own individual actions. An honest open attack on these evils could very well save just as many if not more.” Omaja now looks to Radimir with a sense of pity and sorrow, “if you were not assigned to such things, the darkness in your eyes may have already cleared.”

Radimir nods, “you are probably right.”

Chapter 2 On the road.

The Road went to the west into the Red Ridge mountains, a small but ore rich range. This has helped keep the Ravenwood Republic independant and very wealthy. With one main road leading through and splitting near a town and fort in the valley at the center. To the west it will lead one toward the massive river and natural border between Ravenwood and the Celestial Monarchy. On the river lies the Arch Bridge, a massive stone bridge built like a fortress on both sides. Not only has this provided a formidable defence against any oncoming army. It also is the easiest way to cross the massive river that stretches most of the continent. The North road leads to the massive plains in which Ravenwood provides crops in great abundance to its nation. After a few days the wagons made it to the valley and began to set up camps just outside the town to rest for the night.

Jack and Gabe stretch out the cloth for the tent while Jenevieve goes to gather more tent supplies from another wagon. Radimir knotices Eliana watching a hawk as it

comes to rest on protruding wood near the top of the wagon's cover, “bird scare you?” he asks.

She looks at him then back at the hawk, “he has been following us,” she says.

“Aye, he's mine,” Radimir smirks. “He does a good job keeping pests away from the wagon.” Moments pass and she simply stares at the Hawk enthralled by the reddish brown feathers, its wings buffeting with every gust of wind to keep its balance. Radimir’s eyebrow raises, “come here,” he steps to one of the many compartments opening it up then pushes aside various bottles and pulls out a thick leather glove. “Put this on,” he says now smiling. Eliana hesitantly raises her hand. Radimir slips the oversized glove on her, raises her hand to shoulder level, then stands behind her. “Ready?” he asks. She answers with only a shallow nod. “Kip on!” the Hawk snaps its head in their direction, “kip on!” Radimir hollers again.

The Hawk steadies itself then brings his head low before bolting off the perch down onto Eliana’s gloved hand. She gives off a little shriek pulling her head back and extending her arm as far out as she could. Radimir chuckles, putting his hand under hers to help support and stabilize the hawk's new perch. “It's alright kid,” he says softly, “try bringing him in a little closer it's easier to hold him.” She shakes her head no rapidly. Radimir chuckles again, “common kid he doesn't eat things as big as you.”

Radimir then gently guides her hand in closer. She seems frozen at first then slowly brings up her other hand and strokes the back of the Hawks neck, “he’s soft.” She says now smiling, herself.

“Aye he is.” She begins to relax as she continues to sweep her hand across his feathers. Radimir continues his tone soft in content remembrance, “back when I was first brought to celestial lands they sent me to an outlander tribe disconnected from their corrupt cousins to the east. They are simple living folk and quite good with animals. Before I had only worked with hounds in the pit. They taught me how to care for a horse and teach a bird to follow commands. That one imprinted on me when he hatched, thinks I'm its mother or something.” He laughs, “it wasn't a long time I had with them but it was nice. Just me, a few good people, and a massive wilderness to get lost in.”

“Why don't you go back?” Eliana asks.

Radimirs smile left his face. The thought had crossed his mind many times but he always repressed those thoughts with the same words which he spoke as easily as breathing, “One can do no good secluded from society. I am incapable of living in peace knowing others may suffer as I did, at least children anyway.” He grew slightly frustrated as he continued, “most grown men and women cause just as much misery and corruption as they endure. Young children at least show an eagerness to change when they are corrupt. It is why I am here now, knowing you will not have to endure the Tribes' ways will grant me far more peace than centuries of selfish bliss. Any pain, stress, or chaos that may wrack my body is dismal compared to the torment of not being a part of stopping such evils.”

The Hawk jumps from the glove and pumps itself up with both Radimir and Eliana's eyes following into the now setting sky. Eliana laughs, “when he flew down I thought he was going to attack me.”

Radimir chuckles, a smile returning to his face, “aye, I figured such.”

“Does he have a name?” she asked.

“Nah.”

“You should name him,” she continued.

Radimir rests his elbow on top of her head, his hand hanging in front of her face, “you name him kid and keep the glove,” he softly presses her nose like a button before walking toward Jack and Gabe to help with the tent.

Jack lines up a stake setting it then drives it down first by hand then hammers it in the rest of the way. Gabe followed close behind watching. Jack lays the hammer to the side to set another stake in by hand. Gabe excitedly picks up the hammer and quickly smacks it down on the unready stake. This caused it to drive sideways flat on the ground and pinching Jack's hand. “Ahh!” Jack pulls his hand back.

“Sorry!” Gabe cries out quickly dropping the hammer, fear covering his face. For a moment Jack just looks at him before he pushes Gabe to the ground and stands over him.

“Oi!” Radimir hollars out, “step back roach,” his voice stern yet neutral without rage or compassion.

Jack doesn't move, pointing at Gabe he defends himself, “he hit me with the hammer!”

Radimir, still neutral in tone, responds, “I saw what happened.”

Jack shrugs looking at Radimir as though he is acting foolish, “what was I supposed to do? Not defend myself!”

Radimirs eyebrow raises, “it was an accident. He apologised. You did not defend yourself. You lost control, the end. Now you apologise and help him up.”

Both of Jack's eyebrows go up, crossing his arms and raising his chin, “no, he can get up himself.”

Radimirs chin tucks slightly yet he maintains eye contact, “then go to the wagon roach your filth isn't wanted here.”

Jack leans forward smiling into Radimirs face, “no.” Quickly Radimir’s arm shoots up behind Jack's neck grabbing a handful of his curly hair. Radimir turns toward the wagon intending to drag Jack to it only to see Jenevieve standing right behind him.

Her blue eyes, like that of a calm ocean with a dark sky on the horizon, “let him go!”

Radimir, stunned at her presence and command, keeps hold of the struggling Jack as he responds, “I gave him the chance to make it right, he refused.”

Jens eyes widen and voice begins to show a frustration and sarcasm yet seen in her, “so you lose control yourself and push Jack around. That will surely teach him to be

more kind and gentle towards Gabe, won't it?!” Radimir simply stares at Jenevieve confused at the naturally gentle and meek woman's passion. Jenevieve steps toward Jack pulling the hand off his head of which Radimir made no attempt to resist. She takes both hands and places them on the sides of Jack's face, “Gabe didn't mean to hurt you, Jack.”

Jack doesn't look at her but responds faintly “I know.”

“Then why did you push him down?” she continues. Jack sighs heavily as he pushes her hands away from his face then walks to Gabe now sitting on the ground watching the whole ordeal in silence. Jack reaches his hand out to Gabe and helps him to his feet. He then kneels down to continue on the tent when Jen asks, “do you want to go with me and Eliana to the market, see what's still open?”

Jack stands up with another sigh and walks toward her. “Yah.”

Once they get a fair distance Radimir states to himself “I didn't lose control..” he then looks to Gabe annoyed. “Did I lose control?”

Gabe responds with a giggle and a shrug, “I don’t know.”

Radimir returns the remark with a smile smacking Gabe softly on his head, “let's get this done you grab the hammer. Don't swing until I’m ready aye?”

Gabe jumps toward the hammer, his voice riddled with excitement, “aye aye captain!”

The dusk turns to darkness with only the light from campfires and stars to brighten the moonless night. Eliana lays back on the wheel of the wagon talking to the Hawk as he is perched on his post ready to rest for the night. Although he seemed to not acknowledge her she talked away as though speaking to a friend. Gabe is already fast asleep and laid to rest in the tent. Radimir, Jenevieve, and Jack sit quietly around the campfire, Jack cooking the last piece of animal flesh he attained at the market. Jen looks up at Radimir without his armor; he is far leaner than he originally appeared, his shirt tight with a brownish yellow color. Probably originally white with its coloration coming from a combination of sweat and dirt. Though he removed most of his armor he still wore his bronze manica so heavily patinated it was more green then bronze in color. Radimir pushes to break the silence, “try keeping the meat further from the flame it will cook even and stop the outside from tasting like charcoal.”

Jack doesn't look at him but rolls his eyes as he mutters under his breath, “I'll cook it how I want.”

“Very well,” Radimir replies. After a few silent moments he hesitantly speaks up again, “I apologise for being so rough with you earlier.”

Jack keeps his eyes on the fire, “well I don't accept your apology.” Then another several silent moments drag on before he looks up, eyeing the heavy armplates “You ever take that off?” Jack asked.

Radimir raises his eyes from the fire, “when I sleep yah”

“Where did you get it?” Jack continues

“The pits.”

Jack seems to get interested, “As in the pits in Vanehold?”

“Aye.”

Jack completely forgets about his cooking for a moment, “wait are you from the tribes?”

Radimir brushes off the question, “should we go over some celestial teachings before we call it a night?”

Jack looks at Jen and shrugs, “she used to go over some things and I had plenty of preaching from the monks in Ravenwood. Not sure I need to hear any more of it.”

Radimirs eyebrow raises, “the Ravenwood congregations lack true intention; they seek to be seen as celestial yet don't strive to truly live as such. Tell me what are you taught on matters of deceit?”

Jack rests his head in his hand doing his best to show he is clearly not interested in the conversation. “We are not supposed to lie.”

“And why not?” Radimir continues his questioning.

“Because it's baaaahd.” Jack responds sarcastically, smiling to himself.

Jen cuts in, “so we can trust one another, trust being one of the pillars of a perfect society.”

Omaja walks into the firelight, the lack of his armor only better showing his sturdy frame “Very good young lady. Good to see some true understanding has made it into the republic. Forgive me for my intrusion. There are some things I must clarify,” he seats himself next to Jack pushing back some loose dreads, “Radimir me and my groups will be leaving a fair bit earlier than yours tomorrow morning. Do you recall your route?”

“Aye, we head up north with two other groups, once we hit the plains head west til the river, follow the river south til the Arch Bridge.”

“Good!” Omaja replies, “do not forget if you can avoid lingering in the town up north. The more we can avoid being noticed the better.”

“Aye, will do.” Radimir nods

Omaja looks now toward Jack, “how are you doing young man?”

Jack shrugs, “I’m good.”

Omaja looks at the slightly charred meat Jack has over the fire. “You know Jack, if you rotate and raise it a bit above the fire, the fat will spread and cook the flesh more thoroughly. Leaving it more moist and flavorful?”

Jack looks at him smiling, “You know that's a good idea, thanks.”

Radimirs arms raise though he is clearly annoyed he has a smile on his face. He speaks in nearly a laugh, “Really roach?” Omaja looks back at Radimir with confusion as Jack chuckles to himself. Radimir chuckling a bit himself looks to Omaja smiling, “It's nothing brother.”

Chapter 3 A boys home.

Dawn broke and just as Omaja had said he and the wagons that followed him were gone. Leaving Radimirs and two other wagons to head northward and northward they went. The path was well worn and easily traversed as it sat at the base of two separate mountains avoiding the hard terrain nearly completely. Keeping a good pace they make the journey through in a day an a half. The fall weather makes the journey easily tolerated and quite beautiful. The trees clinging from the mountains popped like flowers in a field with various shades from yellow to red. The winds brought down the scent of the pines that lay farther up the massive piles of rock and soil. They came to the opening out from the mountain range to a small village right where the mountains meet the plains. One could easily see the farmland stretching from east to west, a massive town in the center, some distance from the village.

The wagons began to stop, Radimir's wagon had run over a large stone in the mountain path and had been a little more bouncy than it was supposed to be for the last couple hours. The leading wagonmaster, a middle ranking soldier of the Celestial Monarchy walks back to Radimir, "get what provisions you need and then meet back within the hour."

Radimir jumps from his wagon walking back to the afflicted wheel. "I need to get this checked out first. If it breaks completely I don't have a spare to keep me going."

The wagonmaster shrugs, "you have a smuggler's wagon, just disconnect the back and put everyone up front it will be tight but should do. If we need to, you can have one or two jump on our wagons."

"Nah I ain't leaving nothing, there is a cartwright in the village I'll have him check it out." Radimir responded firmly

The wagon master sighs clearly used to being disregarded by Radimir, "I was told you are a man of honor, one who respects authority."

"I am," Radimir states simply."

The wagonmaster continues "Then disconnect and leave the back of the wagon."

Radimir doesn't face him, still looking at the wheel. "There is no need, should be an easy fix."

Annoyed but respectfully the wagonmaster tries once more, "By the authority of the Celestial Monarchy I command you listen to me and disconnect."

Radimir turns to him, tucks his chin and although does not step closer to the wagonmaster his stance is that of one about to strike another. "This is my wagon, therefore you have no authority over it. I am bound to the Church not to the Monarchy, therefore you have no authority over me. Kine is worth two oxen and can make up whatever time is lost in fixing the wheel. We will catch up with you. I know the way. The end. Now leave me be."

The wagon master waves his hand in frustration as he walks away from Radimir. "Fine, easier on me anyway."

Eliana jumps down from the back of the wagon, her curly hair bouncing as she hits the ground. She was still wearing the oversized glove, pulling it tight before she spoke, “what was he talking about disconnecting the wagon?”

Radimir shrugs off any aggravation and smirks as he waves for her to follow him. “See the large strap on the side under the front seats?” He then points to a spot right under the seat where the strap is connected and disconnects it. The thick leather strap falls to the ground still connected from the bottom showing two simple iron bars with small handles. “Pull these out and the back can fall free. Smugglers use it to drop cargo and quickly get away if caught. Seems useful though the bars get stuck good sometimes and are near impossible to pull free on an incline. Still it's neat aye?”

“Yah, it's neat.” She responds, “why don't you want to do it?”

“It's my home kid. I'm not giving it up for nothing.”

Jen now comes out from the back of the wagon, “so what are we doing then?”

“We get the wheel looked at then we get some rooms at the inn.” Radimir replies, “no doubt it will take some time even with an easy fix. It's mid day already and I aint traveling offroad in the dark.” He then catches a thought, “you wanna drive?”

“I have never done it before and someone has to watch Gabe.” She shrugs.

Radimir tries to convince her, “we could use more able to handle the reins and Gabe is still sleeping in the back. Come on woman, give it a try.”

Eliana then speaks up raising her gloved hand high, “I'll try it?”

Radimir smiles, “eager to try things now huh? You can sit up front with Jenevieve and I will lead on foot. Worry not, Kine does most of the work anyway.” Radimir smirks, then sarcastically attempts a formal bow with one hand guiding toward the driver's seat. The other outstretched to Jen, “Your carriage awaits.”

Eliana jumps ahead of Jenevieve quickly climbing up to the passenger side. Jen sighs and takes Radimir’s hand making her way up to the reins. Radimir then walks to the front. “Now whip the reins but just slightly.” With a little shake Kine began walking forward, her stout muscles easily pressing the wagon forward. “Good now pull slightly on your right until she starts turning then try turning her left. If she starts to shake her head, let up a bit you’re pulling too hard.” Jen follows the instruction though she is a bit gentle in her pulls Kine picks up on the slight redistribution of the force on her bit. “Now pull back evenly to stop.” Even at the low speed the mule takes a moment to stop the wagon shifting forward then back to its resting state. Radimir shrugs, “simple stuff just remember not to pull too hard, those bits arent delicate things.”

They drove casually to the cartwright after a bit of discussion and a promise of extra pay if the work could be finished before nightfall the man agreed and began the work immediately. Jen picks up Gabe and the group begins the short walk to the nearby inn. Catching up to Jen, Radimir proclaims “I will get you all a nice room and a hearty meal for the night.”

“How are you paying for all this?” Jen questions adjusting the now awake but slightly groggy Gabe on her shoulder.

“A nice senator's son and some guards donated some coin to me back in Ravenwood.” He replies more as a joke unto himself then to truly deceive Jenevieve knowing full well it won't be believed.

Gabes head shoots up as he looks around, evaluating his surroundings. “My mommy lives here!” He then begins to shove Jen away frantically trying to get to the ground. Surprised, she nearly drops him then guides him to the ground. He tries to run but Radimir’s hand snaps out and catches his wrist. “Leme go!” Gabe cries, trying for a moment to pull away then bites down on Radimir’s hand.

Radimir growls and his nose flares from the pain yet doesn't let go. Pulling the little boy in close and bearing over him he says through gritted teeth, “Quite biting me boy!”

Jen kneels down next to Gabe “Calm down Gabe talk to us first.”

Gabe releases his teeth from Radimir’s hand pointing in the distance, “my mommy lives here I know where she is!” his eyes wide and voice desperate.

Jen looks up to Radimir, “We should let him show us.”

Radimir doesn't break eye contact with her, he speaks simply and with reverence “I am to take him to Arch Bridge.”

“Look at him.” she pleads.

Radimir looks to the small boy still leaning away from his grip. His hand was still pulling tight on the fingers wrapped around his arm. His eyes shone with both determination and fear, and his breaths short and fast.

The boy was released. Without a second passing Gabe raced away from the group. “Guess we follow.” Radimir begins to jog after the little one, the rest of the group following suit. Jen struggled to keep up with her feet catching the dress with every other step yet kept a solid stride nonetheless. Soon they came across a small collection of houses, one of which Gabe runs up to and tries to open the door. With that not working he starts beating on it yelling, “mommy, mommy!”

Radimir stops a few feet from him, “no one seems to be here kid.”

“She is at her job then.” Gabe explains, “she works over there!” He points to the large town in the distance.

Radimir sighs as he puts his hands on his hips, “kid it would take an hour, probably two with your pace to get there.”

“We can take the people wagon there,” Gabe then points to a small building with a simple stagecoach on the edge of the village toward the large town. “That's what my mommy uses.”

Radimir ponders it for a moment, “you remember where in town she works?”

“Yah, I think so.” Gabe declares.

Jack softly steps into the conversation, “I know where she works.”

Radimirs eyebrow raises as he looks to Jack, “aye, that where you snatched up Gabe in the first place then?

Jack ignores the question, “she works at a tavern on the south east side, I know the way.”

Radimir stands silently a moment before making an agitated growling sigh and motioning them to follow him to the stagecoach. The stagecoach was more of a shallow wagon with two long benches on each side. The ride to the large town was relatively quiet. Radimir looked to read each member of the group. Gabe sat on Jens lap, his eyes locked on the town that now grew closer. His smile had now returned as he restlessly tried to contain his excitement. Eliana was nestled up to Jenevieve, her head on Jen’s shoulder. Jen herself was holding Gabe tighter than normal, a hint of sorrow on her face. Jack sat across from them mostly looking to the floor or toward the fields. However one moment in which Gabe was bouncing and giggling with excitement Radimir caught Jack looking to the boy smiling. Gabe’s joy seemingly the cause behind the smile.

The large town had no walls and only a few short towers beside each major road into town. The structures were constructed with a vast amount of slate wood itself being used quite sparingly. Even with the differences the construction of the buildings have similarities to Ravenwood due to the steep inclined roofs lined with dark wood. A group of republic guards sit at a table, most of them playing a game involving dice. A large awning stretched over them giving relief from the sun. The only visible weapons being mid sized crossbows and clubs with a bronze knotted head. Their armor was nearly identical and all made from bronze. Their torso covered by sheets banded together horizontally. Their feet and forearms adorned with bracers that stretched over the top of their feet and back of their hands. Lastly a simple open faced helm most of which had theirs removed and laying on the table. One with a helm that was adorned with a short strip of blue horse hair eyes the wagon and simple waves to the driver before getting back to his game.

Once in town Radimir nodded to Jack with a simple command, “lead.”

It took little time to make their way to the tavern in question. Gabe goes to run inside and Radimir catches him by the arm, “wait, let her come out here.” He then motions to Jack, “go in tell her you brought back her son.”

Jack looks at him like he is a fool, slightly shaking his head, “no way.”

Radimir continues calmly, “right your wrong roach.”

“I aint no roach!” Jack's fists clench as he replies.

Radimir shows no signs of passion as he finishes the conversation, nodding slightly toward the building, “show me.”

Slightly frustrated Jack wipes both palms on his pants and walks into the tavern. A small time passes and Gabe begins to pull against Radimir’s hand once again. Jack walks out first, a woman soon following her eyes darting toward the group. Radimir

releases Gabe who bolts toward the woman screaming out to her. The woman's knees buckle and she falls to them reaching out and wrapping her arms around her little boy. Showing no attempt to hold back the tears that easily fell down her face. The rest of the group slowly made their way to them. The woman looks up to Radimir, “Thank you for bringing him back to me.”

Radimir shrugs, “I had little to do with it. Your boy's eagerness to return to you was far more so responsible.”

“Who took him?” She asked

Radimir dodges the question, “what matters most is he is returned.” he then began to notice that many were becoming interested in the spectacle. Radimir motions to the others, “we must go.” he then turns and begins to walk away, stopping once he realizes Jen wasn't moving. Both Jack and Eliana stand by her as well.

Jen didn't move her eyes locked on Gabe, “maybe we should stay a bit,” she said. Then she looked toward Gabes mother, “Or we could ride back to the village together. We are staying at the inn there. Radimir can pay for the carriage.”

Gabes mother smiles, “I'd like that. Just let me tell them I'm leaving,” she then picks up Gabe and walks back into the tavern.

Radimir slowly walks back to Jen, “So I am to pay for the carriage?”

Jen looks at him, “we can't let her and Gabe walk back.”

“Agreed,” he replies.

The ride back was full of conversation primarily between Jenevieve and Gabe's mother. Yet Jack and Eliana chimed in as well, sharing some of their own interactions with Gabe throughout their time together. Radimir stayed quiet throughout the ride though seemed to enjoy the good natured fellowship they were all having non the less. Once back in the village Eliana and Jenevieve spent the rest of the evening with Gabe and his mother. Meanwhile Jack and Radimir retrieved his wagon and drove up to the inn.

Once the wagon stops, Radimir asks Jack, “want me to show you how to take off Kine's harness?”

“Sure,” Jack shrugs.

Radimir points out the few spots to disconnect before removing the harness and hanging it on the front of the wagon. “You did good today Jack.”

Jack smiles to himself, “I know.”

It was at this moment Radimir noticed the black flecks in Jack's eyes were gone leaving the light brown eyes with a little arrogance yet without taint.

Nightfall came and the girls returned while Radimir and Jack continued casual conversation seated on the back of the wagon.

“Enjoy your time?” Radimir called out to them.

Jens blue eyes meet his and she smiles, “we helped set up Gabe's room.”

Eliana held a basket in her arm and raised some pastry with jam up high, “and we made tarts, want one?”

“O yah!” Jack bounced off the wagon and threw a hand into the basket.

Radimir shook his head smiling slightly, “the room is ready, each of you got your own bed for the night. It's the room connected to that window.” He points to a second floor window closest to the wagon.

“What about you?” Jen questioned.

Radimir points behind him to the wagon, “I'll be passed out in here tonight, make sure no one steals any of my stuff.”

Jen smiles at him though her face tried to express joy her eyes seems filled with sorrow, “o well goodnight,”

Radimir calls back at her inquisitively, “Jenevieve?”

“Yah?”

“That boy is gonna miss you too, sleep well.”

Chapter 4 Unwelcome guests.

It was a calm night. The comforting sounds of crickets and the slight blue of starlight trickling in the wagon drove Radimir to fall asleep quite easily. Though his well desired sleep didn't last all night as he awoke to what seemed like a scream. He sat up slightly trying to discern if the scream was of a dream or reality. Then he heard the shuffling of feet. Slowly sitting up all the way. He takes his axe in hand and stares at the cloth covering the back of the wagon. Within moments it opens up exposing an older man's painted face, bald head and unkept beard. Without concern of who this man is Radimirs axe flies from his hand. The haft cracked into the man's skull, stunning him heavily and causing him to stumble back. Radimir bolts up and forward in one motion diving out of the wagon onto the man knocking him to the ground. The man, still dazed, attempts to swing his short cleaver like sword at Radimir. Though his wrist is easily caught and pinned against his chest. Radimir leans all his weight on the man's wrist and begins heavily punching the man until he lay nearly unconscious. Radimir takes the cleaver, stands up and with full force slashes the blade across the man's neck ensuring his death.

His instincts now sated Radimir begins to analyse the man. His dress is that of a simple linen tunic and trousers. His face was painted with a red line down one eye and on his arms lay blue symbols representing strength. A low class man from one of the tribes aligned with the abyss and he is painted for war.

“Damnit,” Radimir whispered to himself. His eyes darted across the dark sky barely seeing the billowing of smoke to the east.

“Woman! Wake up!” He hollered at the window as he threw the cleaver into it with a loud bang before jumping into the wagon to don his armor. Taking about a minute

he is back out in both manica and lamellar hopping as he gets his other boot on, “Oi! Wake up! Now!” He roared.

Jen finally opens the window. She looks tired at first then quickly afraid as she sees the body in a pool of blood, “What happened?”

“Raider from the tribes, more coming, we need to go!”

Jen quickly races out of sight. Radimir rushes over to Kine and begins strapping her harness on. It doesn't take long for Jen, Jack, and Eliana to get out panicked and not fully awake. Though in that short time the light from the fires have begun to illuminate the eastern side of the village. Much of the village is now aware of the danger and with only a handful of guards possibly already dead are in a full panic.

Jen gasps as Jack and Eliana get on the wagon, “what about Gabe?” She then turns and begins running toward his mothers home without a second thought.

“Wait woman!” Radimir cries out to her though his command falls on deaf ears. “Raahhh!” Radimir roars and paces a moment thinking. before putting on his helm and tucking the hanging chain tight under his armor at the base of his neck and up onto his chin, “you two get in the wagon and wait.” Radimir hands a broadhead spear to Jack and a loaded crossbow to Eliana, “just point and shoot,” he says before taking a fine tipped spear and kite shield for himself, finally racing after Jen.

Jen bolts around a corner to see two raiders howling to the black sky in the center of the road. The starlight glinted slightly on their chain shirts and iron axes. She jumps back behind a wall then slowly peers around the corner farther down the road screams of the townsfolk and insane wails from the raiders could be heard. Her eyes then lock on Gabe’s house not far from her but to her horror is already on fire with a portion of the building collapsed in. The raiders spot a man and chase him into a building across the way. Tears begin to slide quietly down Jens face, despair gripping her heart as she nearly falls to her knees. Then a faint wail resonates in her ear the crying of a child from the fire that had not fully engulfed the home.

“Gabe,” she whispered, then bolted from the wall and across the road. Once at the door she ripped it open causing black smoke to billow out. With the smoke came the far clearer crying and coughing of a small child. Jen ran inside the smoke causing herself to begin coughing heavily. Trying to remember the layout of the small home as the smoke burned her lungs and blotted out her sight. She then passes by the collapsed portion of the building, its flames rip up for a moment revealing the scorched and still body of a woman crushed under the rubble. Then something grabs her leg, the small boy clinging tightly to her. Jen hoists him up and runs for the door. Once out she tried to keep running only to cough so heavily she could barely get a breath in, forcing her into a struggling walk.

The two raiders came howling out of the building across the way. Blood on their weapons and smeared on the front of their helmets and faces. Once they see the woman and child they freeze for a moment both of their heads locked on to Jen. It was

hard to see their eyes as their helmets had a strip of metal down their nose and curved from cheek to cheek. One begins charging toward her calling out, “I claim her!” The other follows behind howling to the sky. Jen, still unable to catch her breath, ignores the burning in her lungs as she pushes herself to run once more. Her vision began to blur and her run became a stumble once more. In moments she trips on her dress and falls to the ground barely breathing, her arms still around Gabe.

Gabe pushes free and gets up. Standing between the charging raiders and Jen he raises his hand and yells out to them, “Stop!” Just then the two men stumble to a halt staring silently for a moment before a spear comes flying over Gabes head. The raider futally flinches as the spear makes its way to him. Striking him in the chest the narrow spearhead easily punches through the chain and drives into his heart. The force of the throw pushed the man back stumbling before falling to the ground grabbing and foolishly pulling out the spear in disbelief. Gabe’s eyes grew wide in surprise. He turns around to see Radimir standing behind him.

His right eye engulfed in blackness, Radimir draws his axe and charges forward at the remaining raider. Radimir’s shield was raised in front of him but kept below his chin exposing his head. The raider returns the charge with an axe in each hand. Raising one high he cleaves the axe down at Radimirs head. Radimir snaps down to a near squat, slightly raising and turning the shield sideways. The raider’s axe is unable to catch up to the target, connecting only with the shield. Radimir then presses hard with both legs and drives the metal boss of his shield up into the raiders chest. A loud cracking sound resinated in the air as the raider was thrown to the ground. Radimir stumbles a bit after the clash yet moves quickly to take advantage of the gasping grounded victim. The raider was struggling to breath yet tried to get back up. Radimir closes in getting perpendicular with the raider. Jumping up, Radimir puts the shield under him guiding all his weight to come crashing down on the raider. Then he stripped the helmet from the raider's head exposing two eyes completely engulfed in darkness. With one arm pinned the raider tried to raise his other hand in submission and gasped, “no wait!” Radimir did not hesitate, rotating his axe to the studded back he smashed it into the raiders skull.

Radimir walks over to retrieve his spear that lay beside the other raider. Who had bled out shortly after pulling the spearhead from his heart. He then looks back at Gabe and Jen. Jen was sitting up now and trying to take deep breaths. Gabes face was black with soot though he seemed to be faring better. “Wagon, now,” Radimir calmly commanded as he reached a hand down to Jen. Helping her to her feet the three headed back to the wagon.

The three turned down the last short path seeing Jack outside the wagon with three raiders in a half circle in front of him. Jack held a broad bladed spear out in front of him swinging it clumsily side to side to keep them back. The raiders themselves seem to be finding more joy in tormenting the young scared man than simply finishing him off.

“Damnit,” Radimir mumbled under his breath, raising a hand to his side silently commanding Jen and Gabe to stop. He then took a moment to analyze his future victims. One was poorly equipped with a cheap unkempt cleaver like sword as his only weapon and with no armor not even a helm. An easy target of little concern. The second doned that similar to the last two raiders. A chain shirt, a spangen helm, and two axes. Even if properly made, Radimir’s narrow spearpoint should punch through the chain with a solid enough strike. The last raider was armored as well and wielded a large round shield. He wielded a broadsword showing his prestige over his comrades. Though the shield will be a problem to bypass quickly, the weapon wielded for the sake of prestige would be of little concern. Now comes the last problem. How can he ensure Jack is not rushed and overcome before he can intervene?

A smirk crosses Radimir’s face, “you two head straight to the wagon after I get their attention. If I fall, you leave.” Jen nods and waits for Radimir’s next move.

Walking out into the center of the path, Radimir roars out to the raiders, rapping his spear onto his shield to ensure his presence was clear and known. “Oi! You three against me and the boy before your pathetic god or king I call you all!”

The raider with the sword and shield slightly surprised hollers back in a gruff voice, “who are you make challenge against our champion's name?”

Radimir picks up his gait walking as fast as he can to close the distance, “who are you to refuse and dishonor your champion's name? Is it not two to three and the boy clearly can barely wield the weapon. Does your champion have such weak slaves that they cannot face such an easy call!”

The lead raider begins to yell out, rapping his sword onto his own shield, “we are no slaves to no one! Neither are we weak!” He looks to his two companions, “We accept the call aye?”

They both punch their chests and in unison call out, “Aye!”

“Prepare for the Abyss,” the raider smiles, stepping back with his companions and waiting for Radimir to get into position beside Jack.

Radimir leans in close to Jack who pulls away slightly uneasy at the sight of Radimir’s right eye still fully engulfed in black. Ignoring this Radimir pulls him close and whispers, “keep tight to my right, move as I move and focus on keeping the unarmored one back. Understood.”

“Yah,” Jack nodded, his tone nervous but determined, his hands shaking and his eyes wide.

The two stand together; the three raiders across from them also line up side by side. Radimir looks to the leader of the three and nods. With that the raiders shuffle forward together, the unarmored one breaks off and circles around to Radimir’s flank. Jack kept his spearpoint out at the unarmored man turning with him until his back was to Radimir’s right flank who stood firmly looking over his shield waiting for the other two to make an advance.

The raider facing Jack made several fake attempts to charge in, his beard flowing back and forth every time. Jack finally stabbed out at him yet he easily slaps the spear aside and rushes forward. Jack runs backwards colliding with Radimir who instantly shimmies forward advancing on the two other raiders. The unarmored raider nearly closes the distance swinging high at Jack's head. With Radimir out of the way Jack continues his stumble backwards narrowly avoiding the blade as it swings past his face. Still awkwardly running back he swings the spear up into the raider's side connecting only slightly with the blade. The raider grunts then grabs the haft of the spear. Jack desperately attempts to pull it free from the clearly stronger man and almost succeeds until the raider begins swinging his blade at the young man's arms. Instantly Jack let go of the spear and jumped back now weaponless.

As Radimir shimmies forward the two armored raiders split the shielded leader to his left and the other to his right. Radimir moves toward the leader, his open faced helm making it easy to keep the second in peripheral sight. Radimir repeatedly stabs down at the shielded man's exposed feet causing him to drop his shield lower and lift his foot to avoid the thrusts. Once the raider's foot rose up Radimir dives forward punching the boss of his shield into the now fully exposed helm of his opponent. The second raider quickly pressed forward, catching the inside of Radimir's shield with one axe. Leaving him unable to pull the shield in to defend as he swings his second. Radimir jumps back yet is still struck in the neck. The blade slid down the riveted chain links leaving not but a future bruise as injury. Radimir drives his feet firmly on the ground, adjusts his grip on the spear closer to the spear's head and begins plunging it repeatedly into the raider's torso punching through the chain with every thrust. The raider ignoring the wounds kept one axe pulling down on Radimir's shield while repeatedly striking him with his other. Radimir moved only to avoid getting struck in unprotected flesh, solely relying on his armor to hold up. The savage barrage was broken up with the shielded raider crashing into Radimir's side knocking him to the ground. Rolling right as he hit he was back on his feet, shield tucked in and spear ready. Radmir now noticed the trouble Jack was in. Radimir's spear raised and flew from his hand striking the raider facing Jack in the lower back where he instantly dropped.

The shielded raider watched the spear fly by and drop his comrade then hearing a body slump to the ground next to him he looks to see his second comrade had succumb to the many holes in his chest. Unwilling to pursue the fight further he points his sword at Radimir calling out, "we ain't done with you yet, let's see how yah fare against the champion." Then proceeds to run off toward the large portion of the village now aflame.

Jack retrieves his spear from the ground looking down at the raider who fought against him. He was still alive, panicked and confused at why his legs were no longer working. Jack stood over the man spear raised and ready to thrust down and finish him.

“Spare me!” The raider pleaded and Jack froze, unable to strike. Radimir came up putting a foot on the raiders back he pulled his spear out and thrust it again into the back of the man's heart. With that the darkness in Radimir’s eye subsided back to the two lines.

“Sorry.” Jack said

Radimir raised an eyebrow as he looked at Jack, “You did nothing wrong. Let's go.”

Jenevieve and Gabe had already made it to the wagon during the fight. Eliana still in the back with the loaded crossbow in her hands. Radimir climbs up the front taking the reins from Jen and driving the wagon toward the main road. Nearly there with only one more turn before the straight shot to the large town the group sees the main force of the raid just beyond the last turn. Only about 10 men march down the road, the flames of the many ravaged homes illuminating them and licking into the dark sky. They were led by an ogre of a man with a large sword standing near a foot and a half over the others, his arms long and head large. The man roars out and they begin rushing forward.

“Ride Kine!” Radimir hollers slapping the reins and driving Kine to a full sprint. Beating the raiders to the turn only to see the main road blocked off by a man on horseback flanked by two spear wielding raiders. Kine struggles to skid to a stop unwilling to ram through the horse now in front of her. The man's horse was laden with chain barding. Tall and clearly bred for war, such was rarely seen outside of the Monarchy. The man atop it was laden in slightly used full plate save a helm exposing a handsome clean shaven pale face and long blonde hair. He wielded a simple lance and though his equipment seemed to be of noble monarchy stock, his solid black eyes disavowed any valid claim of such.

The blonde man bows his head slightly before speaking, his voice light for a man and quite elegant, “forgive me but you shall not leave.” Then waves for his men to proceed for him.

Radimir swipes spear and shield up once again and jumps down getting in front of Kine and readying himself. A loud gravelly voice roars out from behind him. “Ehs mine Olrick!” The large man and his crew had now caught up to the wagon leaving it completely surrounded. Beside him stood the shielded raider from earlier.

“He da one who put down your lads?” the large man asked

“Aye” the raider responded

The large man steps forward giggling and bouncing slightly with excitement, “make a ring lads! Meh an dis dog are gonna put on a show!”

The blonde man he called Olrick points down the main road toward the large town, a collection of torches massing near its edge, “look you imbecile they already send men to us! Let us slaughter them and be done!”

The large man dismisses the command with a wave, “Yah ain't in charge o meh! An yah aint gunna win no favor bein such a git.” He turns his oversized round head to Radimir, smiling wide, “ow bout dis you win yall can run free, aye?”

Olrick contests yet again, “quit making useless chatter and foolish deals and just fight the man already!”

Shrugging, the large man keeps his eyes on Radimir, “I want da man to have some hope before I rip it all away. What say yah? Yah gunna meet the call?”

Radimir nods, “aye.” His eye remained in its normal tainted state as he had little desire for this fight only concern. Though his opponent wore only a chain shirt the exposed flesh on his arms and face were mutilated from several battles. Radimirs concern was if this man had already attained some form of abysmal favor and if that favor is what preserved the foolishly unarmored man.

The brute lumbered forward the wide two handed blade on his right shoulder. He heavily swings the blade across seeming to aim for the shield itself. Radimir steps in and ducks. Lifting the shield overhead while thrusting his spear into the brute’s armpit. The sword strikes the shield and shears off a large portion of wood. The force of the blow pulled Radimir’s shield and himself with it causing him to stumble backwards. The brute continues forward and swings the sword back with just as heavy a blow. Radimir raises his shield yet again with the massive blade slicing up through the corner and glancing off his helm. Though the strike didn't hit solidly, the force was still enough to daze him. Radimir stumbles to the side and throws the seemingly useless remains of the shield at the unstoppable man. Holding his spear in two hands now he slides his rear hand next to the bottom of the spear in an attempt to get maximum reach.

Radimir now waited shuffling with every step the large man made toward him. A big swing flies past Radimir, he then shuffles in and stabs the man's forearm before bouncing back out of reach. Another large swing and again he shuffles in and stabs. A final big swing and yet again Radimir keeps just out of reach then shuffles in stabbing the forearms. The large man drops the sword and rushes in, his massive hands reaching out at Radimir who retaliates with a final stab into torso. One of the large man's hands reaches out and wraps around Radimir’s neck. The other grabs the spear, yanks it out of himself and rips it from Radimir’s grasp, throwing it to the ground. Surprise and fear resonated through Radmir’s face though his instincts continued. He drew his axe only to have the free massive hand catch his wrist. The brute then lifted Radimir up slightly and forced him to the ground. While falling down Radimir wrapped his legs around the waist of the large man preventing him from getting completely on top of Radimir. One hand pinned his axe to the ground. The other tightened around his neck as the smiling brute's saliva dripped down onto his face. Radimir pulled at the massive hand in vain, he was going to lose this fight.

Everything is quiet save for shuffling armor and struggling grunts. Then a loud snap echos out and a bolt slides into the face of the brute. He roars, releasing Radimirs

neck he pulls the bolt from his cheek. He then turns his head toward the wagon to see a bundle of curly hair holding a now empty crossbow. With a shriek Eliana ducks back into the wagon.

Radimir pulls both knees up to his chin then throws both of his heels into the bottom of the distracted brute's chin. The massive head snaps back and the massive man slumps back knocked near completely out. Radimir sluggishly gets to his feet, his breath heavy, and his axe in hand. The large man also tries to raise up though his body is not quite ready for his brain's command. With two hands Radimir brings the axe down on his neck, over and over and over til complete separation.

Radimir stands completely out of breath. His hair in his face and a smile across, he barely gets out the words, “I win.”

“Well that was delightfully surprising,” Olrick says.

“He cheated the call! The girl interfered!” One of the raiders calls out, others mumbling in agreement.

Olrick raises his hand calling them to silence, “I and possibly you all will surely be held responsible for that fool's death. We shall bring him before Aadimoolan and hope any retribution is directed solely at the slayer of his son's champion.” His black eyes trail to Radimir, “you will ride behind me. Try to stall and die. Harm any of the men and die. Try to flee and I will run down your mutt of a steed and you all, will, die. Understood lowborn?”

“Aye,” Radimir nods

Olrick trots over to the body of the fallen brute. Then brushes his hair back with a hand and spits on the decapitated head, “enjoy death imbecile.” He smiles and motions for Radimir to hurry up.

They follow Olrick out the side of town followed closely by the entourage of raiders close behind. They rode through the worst of the ravagings avoiding the bodies and fallen burning debris was no easy feat. Though Radimir did not stall and made sure to keep pace. As any fight now would be unwinnable and the closer they get to Abysmal lands the more an honest fight would surely be in vain. The guards from the large town had barely made it halfway to the village by the time the group's wagon had left east from the burning remains. The village was deep into Ravenwood’s claimed lands and many forts dotted the borderlands to the east. Keeping eyes for any marauding bands. Such a raid was never heard of nor in the slightest expected.

Eliana had her arms wrapped around Gabe, “What are we going to do?”

Jen looked back at the flames fading in the distance, “I don’t know,” she says honestly.

Radimir turns to face all four of them. Masking his own fear he states confidently, “We endure.”